

This month we bring you a double dose of diabolical demonic devilry! First of all, stand well clear as *The Gate* creaks open, unleashing a horde of mischievous midget monsters from hell. Then in *Gate II* we discover that having your secret wishes granted can be the devil of a pain in the neck. It sounds like classic shock fare to us. See that hole in the ground over there? Let's look into it...

The *Gate* (1987) easily stands from the mass of low budget horror movies made in the mid-to-late 1980s because it plays on universal childhood fears and manages to be scary without resorting to sadism or graphic bloodletting. Instead, the film relies on its likable cast of young actors and some truly imaginative special effects.

Set in a Spielbergian suburb, it centres on a young boy (Stephen Dorff) and his older sister (Christa Denton), who, for the first time have been left in charge of the house while their parents go away for the weekend. After his sister goes off to the mall with a friend, the bored Dorff and his bespectacled buddy Louis Tripp investigate a hole in the back garden that was left behind when workmen uprooted an old tree. Inside the hole, the boys discover a strange egg, which Tripp takes home with him.

Later on it bursts open to emit a weird gas. The boy then notices that bizarre markings have appeared on a nearby slate, and that they are identical to the symbols on a heavy metal band's album cover. By reading the liner notes of the record, Tripp learns that the hole in the back yard is really a gate to hell, and that if a sacrifice is made, demons will burst through and attempt to take over the upper world. The gate can be sealed before the sacrifice if the record is played backwards.

Unfortunately, before Tripp can convince anyone to listen to him, several bizarre things happen, including the death of Dorff's dog. Too distraught to take the dog to the pound, he leaves the job to a friend, who dumps the body in the mysterious hole. This "sacrifice" causes an eruption in the hole, which literally opens the gate to hell. That night, a dozen one-foot-tall mischievous minions from hell emerge from the hole and wreak havoc on the house in preparation for the coming of the giant four-eyed, four-limbed demon lord...

Despite all its dealings with the denizens of hell and the occult, *The Gate* is a remarkably amiable horror movie. The message here is that love is

stronger than hate, and in the end no one really dies. While some hard core horror addicts may consider this movie slightly wimpy, it's certainly a pleasant change from the rash of sadistic stalk and slashers that have been polluting the screens in recent years.

Director Tibor Takacs spends plenty of time developing believable characters, aided by solid performances from his three young leads, and he does well in staging the film's many spooky set pieces. Though the film was created on a relatively low budget (\$6 million), the effects work is always excellent. Rather than spend a lot of time and money on stop-motion animation, effects co-ordinator Randy Cook opted to use short actors dressed in costumes and then make them appear to be one-foot tall by filming them against forced perspective sets.

The forced perspectives in *The Gate* work brilliantly, allowing for fluid interaction between the actors and the "tiny" demonic minions. In fact not since Disney's *Darby O'Gill And The Little People* has this trick been used so well and so extensively. The combination of clever effects work and imaginative storytelling obviously caught the public's imagination, because *The Gate* became a surprise box office hit in the States, and a video smash over here when released by Medusa.

It was inevitable that a *Gate II* would follow, and indeed it did, three years later. At the start of the sequel, young Terry (Louis Tripp) is going through a bad time. His alcoholic father has lost his job as a pilot, and Terry himself is a Grade A geek with few friends; as for the opposite sex, well things are truly dismal in the teen romance department. But he has a plan. Everyone else dismisses the story that some local kids opened up the gate of hell in their back yard as utter nonsense; Terry, of course, knows better.

With the help of a computer and a book of spells, Terry plans to reopen the gate and make a deal with the powers of darkness to improve his lot in life. But his ceremony is interrupted by local toughs John (James Villemaire) and Moe

(Simon Reynolds), and John's not-so-tough girlfriend Liz (Pamela Segall). Like it or not, they're in it together when the incantation works and a tiny demon materialises.

At first things go well. Terry wishes that his father would get his old job back, and it happens. Liz asks for a new car and the cash for a major shopping spree, and they're there. But soon it all goes terribly wrong. Terry's father is horribly injured in an on-the-job accident, the goods dissolve into excrement, and John and Moe become possessed by demonic forces. Liz and Terry must team up to reverse the spell and close the Gate a second time, before chaos reigns on the Earth. Not only do they manage to do so, but in a thoroughly good-spirited climax, even the hamster that Terry sacrificed for the first ritual is brought back to life.

The virtues of *The Gate* were modest, and so are those of its enjoyable sequel. The little demon, a stop-motion creation that recalls the work of Ray Harryhausen (*Jason And The Argonauts*, *Seventh Voyage Of Sinbad*) is foremost among them, and played more for charm than the throng of similar creatures in the first film. It's more a sprite than a monster, a mischievous imp that's forever being stuffed into bags and boxes and jars, from which it invariably escapes and wreaks havoc. This time out the demon is far and away the most interesting character in the film, utterly eclipsing the stereotypical kids.

The story is just an extended, updated riff on the fairy tale about the couple who get a limited number of wishes and employ them badly, finally using the last one to undo all the others and restore things to normal. There's a nice set of morals there about being careful what you wish for and not getting anything for nothing.

In the final analysis, both films are perfect entertainment for younger horror fans - as their 15 certificates attest. They're currently available on sell-through (from Polygram and MGM/UA respectively), and well worthy of the description of *Video World Classic*. In other words, a *hole* lot of fun...



The Gate